

# CHARLOTTE BRONTË

**Charlotte "Jane Eyre" Brontë**  
(1816-1854)

Charlotte Brontë was born 21 April 1816, third of the six children of Patrick Brontë and Maria Branwell Brontë. The major event of her young life was the death of her mother in 1821, which created a lot of chaos. In 1824, Charlotte and her two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, were sent to the newly-opened Cowan Bridge Clergy Daughters' School.

Conditions there were bad even by the standards of the time, and it was not long before both Maria and Elizabeth became ill enough to be sent home, where they both died of consumption in the spring of 1825. Patrick brought Charlotte and her younger sister Emily, who had recently joined them at the school, back home as soon as the other girls became ill, but Charlotte in particular never forgot what the school had been like.

The surviving kids all became each others' best friends. They created the kingdom of Gondal and wrote all kinds of epic stories and poems set in that realm. Charlotte and Branwell were in charge of Angria proper, while Emily and Anne (the youngest) ran the neighbouring kingdom of Gondal.

Charlotte's next adventure was going to school in Brussels with Emily in 1842. Charlotte's time there was brief, less than two years, but it led to her eventual writing of *Villette* beginning in 1852.

Back home, Charlotte lapsed into chronic unemployment and severe hypochondria, actually thinking she was going blind, just like her father was. In 1846 the three sisters published a book of *Poems*, and though sales were very slow, the reviews were good and spurred on further literary endeavours. Charlotte's novel of this time, *The Professor*, was actually rather bad, suffering from a less-than-believable main character. In August of 1846 Charlotte began work on *Jane Eyre*. Though it was published in 1847, Charlotte didn't tell her father about it until the next year, when the novel's success was plain.

This success was followed up by tragedy, however. In September 1848, Branwell died, probably due to his extremely heavy drinking; this was closely followed by Emily's death from consumption in December 1848, and Anne's death of the same disease in May 1849. Bereft, Charlotte and her father clung to each other for support. Charlotte's grief is plain in the last third of her novel *Shirley*, which she'd been working on when all the death started.

Eventually, Charlotte started spending some time in London, meeting other writers of the day. Thackeray in particular was a fan of her works, and, when she attended one of his lectures, she found herself loudly and very publicly introduced to Thackeray's mother as "Jane Eyre".

Her father's curate, Arthur Bell Nicholls, proposed to Charlotte in December, and Patrick was absolutely furious, forbidding the marriage and saying some rather awful things about Arthur. This was the one thing that could possibly have gotten Charlotte to seriously consider marrying him, which she did, in June of 1854.

Marriage seemed good for Charlotte, though her best friend from school, Ellen Nussey, was extremely jealous of Arthur suddenly taking up all of Charlotte's attention<sup>7</sup>. No one got to monopolize Charlotte's attention for very long: she died on 31 March 1855, of what was listed on the death certificate as "exhaustion".

Fortunately for Arthur and Patrick, they'd learned to get along. They were of great comfort to each other after Charlotte's death, which for some reason, was the signal for a lot of gossip, some of it malicious, in the newspapers and magazines. To counteract this, Patrick and Arthur eventually asked Mrs. Gaskell, an author friend of Charlotte's, to write an authoritative biography. Unfortunately for them, Mrs. Gaskell got nearly all of her information from Ellen Nussey, who took great advantage of this to make Arthur seem a villain, and Patrick ended up represented as a stern, overbearing father. This was all accepted as true for many years, and made all of Charlotte's critics suddenly feel sorry for her.